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Should Rumsfeld and Bush Take the Pledge?

By Tom Wicker

If the Democrats who control Congress have a good reason not to confirm Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, it is not that he might be President Ford's running mate in 1976. And if the same Democrats have a good reason to deny confirmation to George Bush as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, it is not that he once was chairman of the Republican National Committee.

In fact, the two cases are quite different. To take that of Mr. Rumsfeld first: As a former member of Congress, a former ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and more recently a high-level Presidential assistant, he not only meets the general standard of experience that has been required of previous Secretaries of Defense; he is at least as well-qualified as, say, Melvin Laird was in 1969, or any number of businessmen who preceded him to the Pentagon in the Eisenhower Administration.

Unless Congressional inquisitors turn up some conflict of interest or other disqualifying fact, therefore, Mr. Rumsfeld's political future should be his own business. Previous Secretaries have been forced in some cases to forsake valuable stock holdings; but no one demanded of them that they shed ambition. Indeed, at least one Secretary, Robert S. McNamara, was actively considered by President Lyndon Johnson as a possible running mate in 1964.

Nor is there anything so inherently nonpolitical about the Department of Defense that Mr. Rumsfeld or anyone should have to rule himself out of post-Pentagon politics. He has pledged not to make partisan speeches for Mr. Ford next year, which is sufficient observance of whatever nonpolitical appearance the Pentagon should maintain. Besides, even if Congress could force him to forswear the chance to be a Vice-Presidential candidate next year, should such an imposed condition by Democrats take precedence over Mr. Ford's choice of a running mate or the Republican National Convention's right to choose its own candidates? Hardly.

Finally, what is wrong with a President maneuvering men of political potential into advantageous positions, so

long as they are qualified for those positions? Why shouldn't Mr. Ford, or any President, move able associates into demanding positions if they are convinced that the results will enhance the public standing of the associates?

The case of George Bush is entirely different, because the Defense Department and the C.I.A. are different. Almost by its nature, the Defense Department cannot be kept out of politics; while the C.I.A. must be kept out

IN THE NATION

of politics. Not only are its resources too secret and too vast to place under any but the most rigidly neutral control; but its intelligence reports to the Government must be kept as free as possible of partisan or ideological taint. Anyone who heads a secret intelligence agency, moreover, probably is disqualified by the job itself—by the agency's entanglements with foreign governments, by the distasteful orders which may have to be given—from becoming an acceptable head of state.

For those reasons, the Democrats in Congress seem within their rights and responsibilities to seek reasonable assurances that Mr. Bush will not be snatched from the C.I.A. to the Republican ticket next year. And in fact any potential C.I.A. director who might be nominated by any President of either party might reasonably be required to forsake national political ambition and express willingness to continue serving in the next Administration. Like the directorship of the F.B.I., this is not a job that should change hands every time a new President is sworn in.

It is another thing, however, to assume that a past party chairman of necessity is such a partisan figure that he could not be trusted to keep the C.I.A. out of politics. The record shows that the trained professional, Richard Helms, failed to keep the C.I.A. out of politics; and that vaunted nonpoliticians before him, like Allen Dulles and John McCone, failed to prevent some of the illegal practices now being disclosed.

Mr. Bush's political experience—backed by his essentially nonpartisan service at the United Nations and in China—might even be an asset at the C.I.A. His knowledge of politics could have helped him to see the pitfalls into which the agency was slipping in recent years; his experience in Congress might have served it better in its current agony than the professional, William Colby, has been able to do.

If the Senate finds that Mr. Bush is not qualified by reason of character or experience to head the C.I.A., of course he should not be confirmed; but the mere fact of his political background should not make such a finding inevitable, much less automatic.